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NOAA Fisheries alerts mariners, right whales are on the move

Endangered species travels south for the winter

This time every year, marine biologists with NOAA Fisheries, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission remind all mariners that North Atlantic right whale calving season begins in mid-November and runs through mid-April, which means these large whales are on the move, making their way down the Atlantic coast of the U.S.

Scientists estimate there are as few as 450 right whales left, making them one of the most endangered marine mammals in the world.

"Each winter pregnant right whales travel more than 1,000 miles from their feeding grounds off Canada and New England to the warm coastal waters of South Carolina, Georgia and northeastern Florida," said Tom Pitchford, wildlife biologist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "This is where these whales come to give birth and nurse their young."

These southern waters are the only known calving area for the species, making it extremely important to raise awareness about the whales' movement and migratory patterns.

"Right whales are dark with no dorsal fin and they often swim slowly at or just below the water's surface," said Barb Zoodsma, NOAA Fisheries' southeast right whale recovery program coordinator. "Many assume that due to their size right whales would be easy to see, but just a slight difference in the texture on the water's surface is often the only clue that a whale is present."

North Atlantic right whales are protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. To reduce the risk of collisions between right whales and boats, federal law requires vessels 65 feet long and greater to slow to 10 knots or less in Seasonal Management Areas along the U.S. Eastern Seaboard, including the calving and nursery area in the southeastern U.S. Speed restrictions are in place in areas along the mid-Atlantic from November 1 through April 30, and in the southeast U.S. calving area from November 15 through April 15. For more information on seasonal ship speed restrictions, visit www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike

Federal law also prohibits approaching or remaining within 500 yards of right whales either by watercraft or by aircraft. NOAA and its partners use planes to fly over the coast of

northeast Florida and Georgia from December through March, and throughout the year in New England waters. The information from these aerial surveys is used to alert boaters of the presence of right whales, allowing ships to alter their course to avoid potential collisions with the whales.

While vessels less than 65 feet are not regulated under the Ship Strike Reduction Rule, collisions with smaller vessels have occurred, resulting in injury to whales and expensive damage to boats.

Clay George, Georgia DNR's lead marine mammal biologist, said recreational boaters and fishermen should "keep a sharp eye out for right whales and give the whales their space." "Driving slowly is the best way to reduce risk of whale collisions."

Another important reminder to gillnet fishermen, regardless of the status of the Florida Net Ban, gillnet fishermen who fish along Florida's east coast need to know that regulations to protect endangered right whales remain in effect in state and federal waters. Specifically, the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area North is closed to all gillnet fishing from November 15 to April 15. Also, from December 1 through March 31, the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area South and the Southeast U.S. Monitoring Area require that gillnet fishermen comply with certain restrictions in order to fish within these areas, including state waters (see 50 CFR 229.32). More details regarding these restrictions are available on pages 53-60 at www.nero.noaa.gov/whaletrp/plan/ALWTRPGuide.pdf

To report sightings of dead, injured, or entangled whales, please contact NOAA Fisheries at 1-877-WHALE-HELP or 1-877-433-8299. You can also identify and help marine mammals in trouble simply by using your smartphone. Visit http://l.usa.gov/1b1kqfv to learn more.

Please also see link below for more on the annual Right Whale Festival to be held on Nov. 15 this year.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources.

2013-2014 Calving Season at a Glance:

52 right whales documented in the Southeast.

Count included 10 new calves.

Boat teams collected genetics samples from 16 right whales, eight of them calves.

Teams responded to one entangled whale, removing more than 480 feet of rope from the juvenile whale over two days in February, an effort that drew international media coverage. Video,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8nQDW02RFE&list=PL388EE00ADE638690

An average of 16 calves has been documented per year since 1990.

On the Web:

NOAA Fisheries Service Southeast http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/
NOAA Fisheries Service Northeast Protected Resources www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res
Right Whale Festival 2014 www.rightwhalefestival.org
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) http://myFWC.com/
Georgia DNR Nongame Conservation Section www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation